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AUTHOR Burkhalter, Nancy
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ABSTRACT

The argument is presented that good writing begins with adult inner speech that ignores audience and then gradually evolves into a form of communication adding the vital component of audience into its focus. It is suggested that when second language writers are not trained to go beyond the inner speech in their own language, they do not have the metaskills, which include the notion of audience, that greatly facilitate writing tasks in the target language. English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) rhetorical errors, it is further argued, can then be attributed, at least in part, to underdeveloped writing skills in a student's native language. An investigation is made of both transfer and developmental rhetorical errors made by ESL students that suggests a shared responsibility between both sources. It is concluded, however, that while language transfer offers a useful method of analyzing some ESL rhetorical errors, it offers no theoretical underpinning on which to base methodology. (GLR)

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SECOND LANGUAGE WRITING MISTAKES:

ARE THEY COGNITIVELY OR DEVELOPMENTALLY BASED?

Nancy Burkhalter
University of New Mexico

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(Address as of July 1, 1990:
114 Sachem Village
W. Lebanon, NH 03784)

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Writing is an unnatural and difficult act, at least for most people. Experience or talent does little to alleviate the anguish of producing a written product. Many skilled writers report that their only advantage lies in increased efficiency at the planning stage. But the act of making the words on the page reflect what is in one's mind remains an arduous process.

When a writer tries to express thoughts in a non-native language, difficulty increases exponentially. One need only examine mistakes in an English as a second language (ESL) composition to see evidence of struggle. However, blaming negative transfer from the writer's first language is not a sufficient explanation. Recent research has shown that these problems spring from a more complicated, cognitively-based etiology than mere language transfer would suggest: Writers have not yet developed proper writing skills in their own language.

Part of proper rhetorical (here, defined as prose composition) skills for any writer in any language entails awareness of the intended audience. What is a natural process for a speaker becomes a separate and completely new skill for a writer. Speakers adjust sentence structure, intonation, lexical items, even phonetic choices to accommodate their perception of the listener's age, social status, relation with the speaker, etc. (See Labov's 1963 study of Martha's Vineyard and 1966 New York department store of 'r' variation for a discussion of phonetic shifting due to audience.) The task is performed, for the most part, without the speaker attending consciously to it. But writing, which also requires just as much (if perhaps a different kind of) attention to audience is a much less practiced form of communication; the writer may, therefore, fall short of fully understanding what the reading audience expects from a piece of writing.

Mistakes in ESL papers can be at least partially explained by drawing on the notions of inner speech (Lev Vygotsky) and egocentric speech (Jean

Piaget) in children. They argue that all children go through a stage where language is not meant for an audience but for their own purposes. Adults also have a form of inner speech but its purpose differs from that of children.

This paper will argue that good writing begins with adult inner speech that ignores audience; then gradually evolves into a form of communication adding the vital component of audience into its focus. When second language writers are not trained to go beyond the inner speech in their own language, they don't have the metaskills (which include the notion of audience) that greatly facilitate writing tasks in the target language. ESL rhetorical errors can then be attributed, at least in part, to underdeveloped writing skills in a student's native language.

This paper will investigate both transfer and developmental rhetorical errors ESL students make and suggest a shared responsibility between both sources.

TRANSFER ERRORS

Whorf (1956) holds that:

> We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native language . . . The world is presented in kaleidoscopic flux of impressions which has to be organized by our minds -- and this means largely by the linguistic systems in our minds. We cut up nature, organize it into concepts, and ascribe significance as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement to organize it in this way" (1956, p. 212-214).

If Whorf is correct that language structures our world, and most fields tend to agree with at least the weak version of the Whorf-Sapir hypothesis, then it follows that, by the time learners are proficient enough to create written language at the paragraph level, a particular way of organizing the world, that is a kind of cultural imprinting or encoding, becomes unmistakably evident (Kaplan, 1972, p. 1).

Kaplan, who wrote the seminal article on contrastive rhetoric in 1966, diagrammed what he saw as the different rhetorical modes from various

languages.

English Semitic Oriental Romance Russian

(Broken line indicates irrelevant material introduced into the paragraph.)

These diagrams intend to show that each language manifests a different rhetorical "logic," which cannot be attributed solely to grammatical or semantic differences in the languages involved, but are instead due largely to "phenomenological" differences between cultures (Kaplan, 1976). English, for instance, goes directly to the point, using data (examples, anecdotes, facts) which support the thesis statement and tolerates no digressions. This differs markedly from the Oriental paragraph, which is more circular, and from the Semitic which follows parallel lines of development. A paragraph in Spanish or French allows for rather complex digressions, somewhat similar to the Russian patterns.

From a pedagogical standpoint, Kaplan concludes that these different imprintings cause difficulties for non-native speakers writing in the target language because they map their first language (L1) onto the target language (L2) at the microlinguistic level, (e.g., lexical, syntactic and semantic levels) and at the rhetorical or macrolinguistic level (e.g., thesis and topic statements, paragraphing). Therefore, such students should be taught the rhetorical patterns of the target language.

Thus, there is a point at which we can test the Sapir/Whorf hypothesis: If, as Whorf states, cognitive abilities are *a priori* restricted by one's native language, then we should be able to predict how a student will perform on a composition in the target language. Many times this is possible.

At the microlinguistic level, for instance, we expect the Arabic

speaker to retain the referent in relative clauses since Arabic does not delete it.

1) *This is the record which I bought it.

We know Japanese doesn't have an article system; consequently, we often see 'a' or 'the' omitted:

2) *Japan is very small country compared to United States.

Chinese uses punctuation like the comma differently than we do. Although this writer uses the comma correctly to separate a dependent from an independent clause, she has no idea of the expectations we as English readers have regarding its total function.

3) Even though my parents are still in China

, I think of them all the time.

As much as this theory appears to be a neat, clean hook to hang ESL mistakes on, it only partially accounts for them. There are other microlinguistic errors that cannot be attributed to L1 interference. Take, for instance, those mistakes in two-word verbs or verbs and prepositions that all students seem to make, regardless of their L1.

4) *It's a lot of people at the picnic.

Turning to the macrolinguistic level, let's examine the following composition of a Japanese ESL student at the University of New Mexico in light of Kaplan's (1966) claim that Oriental writing uses an indirect approach and turns and turns "in a widening gyre. The circles or gyres turn around the subject and show it from a variety of tangential views, but the subject is never looked at directly. Things are developed in terms of what they are not, rather than in terms of what they are" (Kaplan, 1966, p. 406).

(No title)

> My country has several nation's problems. One of the greatest problem is children's education problem. It is very serious problem in my country. It has connection with juvenile delinquencies. There are three causes of juvenile delinquencies. These are different way

of thinking between parents and children, fond parents or their way of education, and educational system in my country.

Different way of thinking between parents and children causes a generation gap between parents and children. Today's families in my country, some fighting between parents and children occur at a lot of part. However, those can't say which is wrong. Only way of solution is a consultation between parents and children. They should have come to an understanding with each other.

Bringing up children indulgently or their wrong way of education is parent's responsibility. If parents bring up children indulgently before they go to school, they will be probably puzzled as to live in social life later on. It causes also a children's delinquency.

Last problem of children's education problem is educational system in my country. It causes a generation gap between teachers and students because teachers way of thinking is very different from students way. This reveals regulations of elementary, junior high, and high schools. These regulations restrict children's freedom. Then children disobey these regulations and after that, they might be juvenile delinquents.

In conclusion, this problem is very difficult to solve. And it is very serious problem in my country. However, this problem will have to be solved the near future. Therefore, we should esteem the opinion of teachers or parents and children as well.

While it is true that this student has learned enough to make a stab at a thesis statement and three paragraphs of support, she fails miserably at providing concrete, logical evidence to back up her claim. It certainly talks "around" the topic, as Kaplan predicts, and lacks the support an English reader would expect. But is this lack due solely to L1 interference? Research by Matalene (1979), Hinds (1983), Flower (1979), Das (1985), and Mohan and Lo (1985) has cast doubt on Kaplan's claim. Not only have these researchers found that Kaplan's theory explains only certain errors, but it doesn't help teachers ground their methodology in a solid theoretical framework.

Hinds, for instance, criticizes Kaplan for inferring about L1 rhetorical styles from L2 compositions. We should not rely on a Chinese student's English composition for information about Chinese rhetoric any more than we would rely on an American's French composition to infer anything about English rhetoric. A lack of linear development does not automatically mean L1 interference.

Errors could spring from a wealth of other sources: 1) A student's English may be inadequate to express complex ideas; 2) A student who is unfamiliar with a topic may be unable to write a well-organized essay about the topic in any language; 3) A student may feel the teacher values correct grammatical expression more than organizational form and therefore pay less attention to it; and 4) A student may not be familiar with the conventions of expository writing in the native language (Mohan & Lo, 1985, p. 521).

It is Mohan and Lo's fourth criterion that provides a springboard for discussion about developmental errors.

DEVELOPMENTAL ERRORS

Flower (1979), in her article "Writer-Based Prose: A Cognitive Basis for Problems in Writing," explains L2 rhetorical errors from a developmental standpoint and draws upon the Vygotskian notion of inner speech. Vygotsky (1962) summarizes Piaget's idea of egocentric speech:

> The child talks only about himself, takes no interest in his interlocutor, does not try to communicate, expects no answers, and often does not even care whether anyone listens to him. It is similar to a monologue in a play: The child is thinking aloud, keeping up a running accompaniment, as it were, to whatever he may be doing (Vygotsky, 1962, p. 15).

Flower (1979) provides three parallels between the Piagetian idea of egocentric talk of the child and the Vygotskian mental or inner speech of the adult.

First, they are highly elliptical. When we talk to ourselves or write notes, explicit information is deleted since it is always known to the speaker.

Second, words become loaded with a meaning far richer than what they normally mean to the general public. This is not to say they are similar to poetry, but rather they are "the sum of all the psychological events aroused in our consciousness by the word" (Vygotsky, 1962, p. 146). In their Vygotskian approach to writing, John-Steiner and Tatter (1983) describe the

problem facing inexperienced writers as an inability to "transform their semantically condensed inner thoughts into a communicatively effective external code."

Third, egocentric and inner speech both lack logical and causal relations. Piaget noted that children lump all causal relations reserved for words such as "because," "therefore," and "although" into the word "then" (Flavell, 1963, p. 275). Many notes to oneself also lack these causal signals.

Vygotsky also wrote that young children think in complexes uniting objects into families that share concrete or factual bonds as opposed to concepts, which unite abstract or logical ones. Adults use these complexes on a daily basis, perhaps without much alternation. But as Flower states, concepts, which express abstract, logical relations, are what adults must tap during the writing process. The evolution of a child's concept development happens as cognitive capacity develops. An adult learns to refine the ability to move from complexes to concepts through training abetted by cognitive ability and background. "But whatever its source, the ability to move from complexes of egocentric speech to the more formal relations of conceptual though is critical to most expository writing" (Flower, 1979, p. 22).

These privately coded thoughts are fraught with meaning known only to the writer. Flower (1979) provides before-and-after compositions that nicely illustrate the solipsistic, brainstorming, first drafting process (she calls them "home movies of the writer's mind at work") and the subsequent better organized version that takes the audience's needs and expectations into account.

Flower cautions that egocentric speech is not necessarily a stage at which adults who write poorly are frozen. It is, rather, a stage that

writers feel comfortable falling back on. It is a "natural, less cognitively demanding mode of thought" (Flower, 1979, p. 22).

Taking the perspective of another person (the reader) is a highly demanding cognitive process. It means simultaneous attention to and comparison of two knowledge networks: the writer's and the audience's. Therefore, the writing process begins by paying attention only to information and concepts through brainstorming, which may take the form of outlines, lists, or an actual draft. Much thinking and planning may have preceded the first draft, and as imperfect as it may be, it reflects the writer's current progress in the thinking process. Flower calls this phase the writer's "homework." Then, with the heavy cognitive effort done, writers can then "unfold their compact inner speech into the detailed, sequenced, and expanded writing which effectively communicates with the reader" (John-Steiner and Tatter, 1983, p. 94). The process is a dialectical one in which the good writer continually compares a private knowledge network with that of the audience, making certain in the end the two match. Many writers then hand their work over to an editor, who represents the audience's knowledge network.

Given the complexity of the writing task for a native speaker, asking an ESL student to do all this in addition to grappling with a foreign language begins to explain why many compositions founder. The job of the adult writer is to turn outward, away from these condensed and elliptical concepts that represent abstract, logical thought patterns. "Good writing," explains Flower, "is often the cognitively demanding transformation of the natural but private expressions of Writer-Based thought into a structure and style adapted to a reader" (Flower, 1979, p. 20). Reader-Based prose is the reflection of <u>purpose</u> while the more solipsistic Writer-Based prose tends to reflect <u>process</u>.

While students certainly do have L1 transfer problems, other errors may be explained by the fact they 1) rely too much on their inner speech and 2) haven't learned how to recognize or unfold it appropriately for a reading audience.

STRATEGIES

The view that writing may stem from a more developmental basis helps teachers to focus their writing instruction less on which language ESL students speak and more on considering them as writers who have not learned a Reader-Based approach to the task. This means helping them develop strategies to identify their own inner speech and turn it into comprehensible prose for their intended audience.

Flower (1979) favors an approach which first heightens students' awareness of words that reflect inner speech and helps them to elaborate on them for the audience. Using a composition written earlier in the year, students circle or underline those words and phrases that seem condensed or underdeveloped and work on expanding them in their rewrite.

One student wrote:

First Draft: "By having these two jobs, I was able to see the business in an entirely <u>different perspective</u>." (Underlining indicates a loaded expression marked by the writer.)

Second Draft with explanation of what she actually had in mind in using the circled phrase: "By having these two jobs, I was able to see the true relationship and relative importance of the various departments in the company. I could see their mutual dependence and how an event in one part of the firm can have an important effect on another."

The results of using this technique "are not unlike those brilliant explications one often hears from students who tell you what their paper really meant" (Flower, 1979, p. 32).

For developing audience awareness, Elsasser and John-Steiner (1977) use a shopping list, one which is prepared for themselves and another for a stranger. Students could then be asked to write the list for an array of audiences (a student from their home country, the teacher or a neighbor) to see how content would change. For instance, the student may list bread, milk and eggs. But the recipient may not know to buy whole-wheat bread, a half-gallon of 2% Borden's with an expiration date at least one weak away, and a half-dozen brown, fertile eggs. The audience may not even be familiar enough with American grocery stores to understand what the expiration date means or what fertile eggs are and require more complete instructions. This exercise sensitizes them to what shared knowledge exists between the writer and reader. When possible, writers could check their understanding of the reader's knowledge base and possible need for elaboration through conversations with that person.

CONCLUSION

The Whorf-Sapir hypothesis has stimulated much discussion about the effects of language on the world. But Kaplan's claim that it affects L2 performance at the rhetorical level does not have much empirical support. While language transfer offers a useful method of analyzing some ESL rhetorical errors, it offers no theoretical underpinning on which to base methodology.

The need to refine our knowledge in this area is evident. There may, in fact, be other aspects of academic discourse that are universal and those that are culture specific. For instance, what is cognitive about learning mathematics or scientific concepts, and what is developmental? Writing across the curriculum is bringing out some very interesting differences and similarities about various academic domains. Other research could help determine if skillful L1 writers have an advantage in L2 compositions on

either the micro- or macrolinguistic level.

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